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Nutrition Education — An Integral Part of a School Feeding Program

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During recent months we have received many requests for guidance in developing nutrition education programs for young children. In the last issue of NPN we presented ideas for developing programs in elementary schools. Nutrition educators agree that attention should also be given to developing wholesome attitudes toward food and desirable eating habits among younger children. In this issue of NPN, our guest author describes a nutrition education program that includes preschoolers.

CHILDREN'S CENTERS

In San Francisco, there are 27 Children's Centers administered by the elementary division of the San Francisco Unified School District. Sixteen hundred children are enrolled, ranging in age from 2 years through elementary school age. This program has been in operation throughout California under the California State Department of Education and local school districts since 1943.

The primary function of these centers is to act as a supplement to home and school by providing educational supervision and instruction for children whose mothers must work to support or to help support their families.

The centers are open from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m., 5 days a week the year around to accommodate working parents. Prekindergarten-age children spend the entire day in the centers. School-age children come to the centers before school in the morning, return to the centers for lunch, and then again return after class in the afternoon. On school holidays and during vacations, the school-age children also spend the entire day in the centers.

Parents pay a fee for this service based on their gross income, number of their children using the centers, and the time the service is used. The largest portion of the cost for this program is carried by the State. The city also contributes through a local special tax.

Significance of nutrition program

Two aspects of the program are unique. Mealtime and nutrition are considered integral parts of the curriculum, and a nutritionist is employed to plan and direct the food service and nutrition education program.

Food service

The long-day program emphasizes the importance of food service which includes breakfast—at a slight additional cost to the parent—midmorning nourishment, lunch, and afternoon snack. A child who eats all of these meals at the center receives 75 to 80 percent of his daily nutritional requirement.

Orange juice, fresh orange sections, or tomato juice is served midmorning. Afternoon snack is planned to be nutritionally rich in foods often left out of the family diet when funds are short, such foods as milk, meat or meat alternates, and fresh fruits and vegetables. Tasty examples are: a small sandwich or cheese fingers with apple wedges; or raw vegetables with cheese dip and a glass of milk or hot chocolate.

A wide variety of food is offered including national and regional foods that reflect the diverse backgrounds of the families using the centers. The menus are flexible to allow for special programs as described hereafter. Federal surplus commodities are available and are used as they fit the menu, not as the basis for menu planning.

Personnel training

New recipes are tested in cooking classes at City College of San Francisco, a junior college, under the jurisdic-

tion of the San Francisco Board of Education. These classes are designed as in-service training for the kitchen staff and are directed by a chef-instructor from the college. In this way, the cooks can taste and see the food as it should be when served to the children. The cooks are also taught the importance of food in the all-over education program.

Food, to be effectively used as an educational tool, must be of the best quality. Food for nursery-age children should be tasty. It can be mildly spiced—not always bland—and should be of a size and consistency that the children can manage with a spoon or fork and can chew and digest readily. Eye-appeal has much to do with appetite. It is the responsibility of the cooks to see that the food is attractively served.

Setting the stage

Learning is a cumulative process. The first exposures to nutrition are of primary importance if further learning is to take place. Food to which children are early exposed becomes habit, whether it is good or poor. When children become accustomed to balanced meals at the center, they ask for them at home. In this way, a positive influence is exerted on the nutrition of the entire family.

Routines before and after meals are as important as the meal itself. Young children come into the center from outdoor play, go to the lavatory, wash, and then have a pre-lunch rest—a "settling down" period to get ready for a calm, leisurely lunch.

The food is only one part of the mealtime experience. In the Children's Centers, the lunchroom is a laboratory for learning, a place for testing ideas which may or may not be directly related to foods and nutrition, and a place where children can develop sound attitudes toward acceptable social behavior as well as toward food.

The tables are set for family-style service, and the teachers, both school-age and nursery, eat with the same children each day. This homelike situation gives the teacher an opportunity to know the children in an atmosphere not duplicated in the classroom. As the teacher comes to know each child better, she can serve and supervise his individual needs. She has the opportunity to teach good eating habits and to observe the progress of the children in their understanding of good nutrition.

THE PROGRAM

Building good food habits

The teacher knows the importance of serving a small portion of food to young children with the expectation that it will be eaten and enjoyed. She encourages a "tasting" bite of an unfamiliar food.

The children are not forced to eat, and desserts are never withheld in order to coerce them into cleaning their plates. One of the goals of educating at the table is to build a positive attitude toward food. Food, therefore, should never be used as a controlling device as this may have the opposite effect.

Manners are more easily learned by example than by scolding. Children are taught to ask for seconds by naming the foods, thereby increasing their vocabularies. The school-age children serve themselves. A host or hostess, or both, are chosen for each table. They assume duties commensurate with their developmental levels and abilities, thus learning by experience acceptable social practices.

Nutrition education in school-age curriculum

The principal goal of nutrition education for the school-age group is to teach them how to choose proper foods and to plan and prepare a balanced meal. To accomplish this, other areas of the school curriculum may be brought in.

Frequently, the teacher is clued to the interests of children from conversation that develops during mealtime. The imaginative teacher then builds on this interest, and the curriculum for the entire day or season takes root and is nourished by the spontaneous enthusiasm of the children. At one center, a school-age child asked, "Where did I come from?" What he meant was, "Was I born in San Francisco?" This was the embryo of their summer program.

The next day the children were eager to talk about their family origins. They found that many of them—or their parents or grandparents—came from Mexico and Central or South America, including Peru, Nicaragua and El Salvador. These children were eager to share their knowledge of the countries of their families with their peers.

Learning about people of other nations includes tasting their foods. Most of the food preparation centered around Mexico. The children decided to have a fiesta. Their menu was guacamole dip made with avocado served with tostado chips and pinolillo, a Mexican chocolate drink. A special Mexican luncheon featuring tacos was also planned and prepared by the children. They found recipes native to Mexico, and improved their reading and writing skills by copying the recipes. Special foods had to be purchased and excursions made to stores to buy these foods.

The children learned something about spending within the limits of a "budget." Spanish vocabulary was increased by learning the Spanish words for the foods served. Geography and history were introduced by learning the origin and background of the foods and where they are grown. The actual cooking involved weights and measures, chemistry and physics. Many problems had to be solved in planning for the luncheon; for example, how many tacos would be needed to serve a certain number of children.

The costumes brought from home, the music and dancing, and decorations appropriate for a Mexican luncheon all helped to set a festive mood.

The chatter at home about the project brought the interested parents to the center and they too wanted to have a dinner. A pot-luck meal featuring national dishes of their native lands was served. This kind of participation not only gives acceptance to a variety of foods, but better understanding and acceptance of people from other lands.

During the school year, the school-age children carry on only limited cooking experiences because of time restrictions and the problems involved. Summer is an ideal time to expand this type of activity.

Several years ago, excursions to Sigmund Stern Grove were planned as an extension of the cooking program in the centers. Stern Grove is a "natural" for day camping with its giant eucalyptus trees, a meadow to run and play in, paths to walk and explore, and barbecues for cooking.

Advanced planning by teachers is essential for smooth operation of such a project and cannot be over-emphasized. Factors that must be taken into consideration for outdoor excursions are ages of children, size of group, teaching staff, distance to be traveled and available equipment.

Generally, two centers plan together for these excursions. Before the children are exposed to decision making, their teachers must have clearly in mind the abilities and limitations of the children. The teacher must first decide which decisions the children are mature enough to make and which must remain the responsibility of the teacher.

Delegates from each of the two centers, elected by the children, meet to share ideas for the excursion. They may each propose a menu and plans for activities, then vote on which menu and which activities will be carried out. The group must arrive at a decision as to which center will be responsible for buying and preparing the various foods. The delegates in turn report these decisions back to their own councils for approval or for further planning.

We see here a democratic group in action, a chance to inspire individual initiative and leadership, and an opportunity to share knowledge with others. Here again, teacher guidance is necessary. Is the menu nutritionally sound? Can the food be prepared using the available facilities? Can the budget afford it? If this is a second or third excursion, will the menu give the children an opportunity to advance their cooking skills? What equipment will be needed?

Committees for various activities can be chosen in the council meetings. The food committee will be responsible for preparing the menu, making a list of food, and determining the amounts needed. The table-setting committee will count the silverware, napkins, etc., make a centerpiece, and decorate the napkins and a butcher-paper tablecloth.

Perhaps the most valuable part of the excursions is the opportunity for decision-making by the children. A wide variety of experiences in problem solving is afforded them in a well planned cooking activity. The children need the skillful guidance of adults, but unless they are allowed to tackle their own problems, they cannot gain experience which is essential in developing maturity. The teacher must be flexible enough to permit the children to make decisions in both planning and problem solving. This aspect of nutrition education is recognized as an essential part of the Children's Centers program.

Nutrition education in nursery curriculum

Nursery-age children learn through first-hand experiences. Their world is a laboratory. The nursery curriculum is planned for active participation, and equipment is especially chosen for this. Many activities involve developing the awareness of the five senses. The following projects show how this can be done.

The teacher shows the children cinnamon bark, whole cloves, whole pepper and fresh ginger root. She shows them the spices in commercially powdered form. The children then grind the peppercorns and cloves in pepper mills and mash the ginger and cinnamon bark with a mortar and pestle. They smell, feel, and taste each spice; they identify the spices and describe the texture, taste, and smell. This can be followed by the children making cinnamon toast, a food with which they are already familiar.

The same procedure may be used with fruit, starting with familiar ones. The teacher shows the children an orange, apple, pear, lemon, grapefruit and banana. The different fruits are passed around, and the children feel and smell them. The teacher peels and cuts all of the fruit into small portions and serves several pieces of each kind to the children and herself. While she is doing this, she asks questions such as "Which piece is soft?" "Is it sweet or sour?" Or "What color is it?" The lesson can end with squeezing orange juice for mid-morning nourishment.

The opportunity to use food as the basis for sensory experiences can be good if used in situations similar to those described above. Food should not be used as a plaything by permitting children to knead, squeeze, or play with food at mealtimes. The pleasant sensations that children derive from feeling flour while making bread, or touching meat when mixing meat loaf, can develop the right attitude toward food and food preparation. Using food as a plaything out of context, such as substituting cornmeal for sand, can develop wrong ideas about food.

Nutrition education for teachers

The nutritionist participates in the orientation and in-service classes planned for the teaching staff. Generally, teacher-training institutions do not include nutrition edu-

cation in their curricula. Many teachers have never had the opportunity to serve food to children or to eat with a group of children before they came to the center. The teacher's attitude toward food and her own food habits play a vital role in influencing the eating habits of the children. It is her responsibility to create the environment for learning, which means a relaxed, pleasant dining atmosphere.

Faculty meetings are held in the centers each week. Frequently, nutrition is chosen as the topic, and the nutritionist is invited.

Plans to bake only cookies should be discouraged. The learning potential of baking cookies, such as using a variety of leavening agents or measuring liquid and dry ingredients, is recognized. However, a more solid approach is to prepare foods that include basic nutritional needs, integrating the program with other classroom activities.

The children should be able to repeat the cooking projects at home. Items prohibited by the family budget and those with little nutritive value should not be used.

As new foods appear on the menu, informational bulletins are sent to the teaching staff. The bulletin might be about the history of tomatoes or squash and their nutritional importance, or a suggestion for a cooking project involving the children in lunch preparation. During the summer months, the menu for one day each week is specially written for indoor or outdoor cooking. The children and teachers frequently plan a cooperative patio lunch.

Nutrition education for parents

Menus are posted in the centers so that the parents will know what foods their children are served. An additional menu with supper suggestions is written. This meal is planned to balance the day's nutritional requirements. The recipe for one of the items on the supper suggestions is reproduced and made available to parents. These recipes are generally low-cost and easy to prepare; some are those used in the centers. The children ask for these foods at home, and the parents then request the recipes. Mothers, too, share their family favorites. Their recipes are standardized and distributed for supper suggestions. Again, many national and regional dishes are included.

Occasionally, a letter to the parents is sent by the nutritionist with the recipes. The letter may describe ways to interest children in food preparation at home—a suggestion for an ambrosia salad, for example, or perhaps an introduction to serving tongue or tripe. The nutritional significance of the meal is indicated in the letter.

Each month, the parents meet at their center. This meeting is directed by the adult education division of the San Francisco Unified School District. Parents may choose the subject to discuss. When nutrition is chosen, the nutritionist often speaks. It is important for the parents to understand the goals of nutrition education in the center and then support these learnings at home. A frequent concern of many parents is the quantity of food their children consume. They do not always understand that children's appetites vary with age and growth. The amount of food that children can be expected to eat is sometimes demonstrated at the meetings by setting up sample plates of the food served at lunch to different age groups.

Frequently, the meetings are held at suppertime, and the parents provide the food. A cookbook, "Let's Meet and Eat," has been prepared by the Children's Center Division to help parents plan these suppers. In addition to recipes, menus are included to insure a balanced meal.

IN CONCLUSION

These are but a few examples of how nutrition education can be incorporated into the school curriculum and become an integral part of an educational program.

In order to make this possible, certain factors are necessary. The school administrator must provide a framework within which the nutritionist can work toward the objectives of nutrition education. Food service must be planned with nutrition education as a primary objective. Well-balanced meals with a variety of foods should be served family style. Close supervision by teachers using mealtime as an opportunity for teaching is essential. Finally, there must be a close working relationship between the nutritionist, those preparing the food, and the teaching staff.

Children's Centers is running its nutrition service to its full educational potential.

We are indebted to Loretta Juhas, nutritionist with the San Francisco Unified School District, for this description of her work in the Children's Centers. Miss Juhas is pleased to share her experiences with other nutrition workers. Anyone wishing to reprint parts or all of this article may do so, but the author should be credited.

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